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ABSTRACT

A semester elective program in English, established as a 2-year course of study for juniors and seniors at Tempe, Arizona, High School, attempts through flexible programming to stimulate teenage interest in English. Adapted from the Trenton, Michigan, study on Appropriate Placement for Excellence in English, the Tempe program is ungraded, differentiating only between regular or "extra challenge" courses, such as Literary Criticism. The freshman and sophomore curriculum requires students to take four 1-semester courses and, in addition, allows them to choose any other course in the curriculum for elective credit, whereas the junior and senior curriculum offers more than 24 semester electives in English from which students may choose freely. In the 2 years of planning before the program was implemented, 24 courses most popular with students were chosen from 53 possible course offerings, course outlines were written, and means for coordinating and evaluating the program were worked out. (Three course outlines on The Film, The Literature of War, and Sophomore Composition are included, and the relative popularity with the students of each course in the curriculum is indicated.) (JB)

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FLEXIBILITY IN THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM: THE SEMESTER ELECTIVE PROGRAM

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Sensitive teachers are aware of and very much concerned about the despondency of teenage students. As English teachers we realize the boredom and frustration of students when they are forced to study grammar even though they aren't interested; they've had it every year since fourth grade, and it hasn't made writing any easier or more satisfying. We feel bad that students don't respond at all or respond negatively to assigned reading when we know they do read other material of their own choice outside of class. We ourselves don't look forward to a year of teaching Freshman English when it was assigned to us without consideration for our personal interests. Also the freshman textbook may not contain selections we personally would consider provocative material for building an English program geared to the students in our classes, that is, if we have the freedom to develop our own programs. We're tired and discouraged at working hard to prepare interesting materials but finding a lack of student interest no matter what we do. A new concept of curriculum development is emerging as teachers begin to experiment with elective English programs as an antidote to the pervading apathy that exists in so many English departments.

English departments all over the United States, frustrated at the overwhelming task of trying to make the school system more flexible, are building flexibility and concern for student interests into their now-existing school schedules. Semester elective programs are providing the students with choices of subject matter most appealing to them, often classes that have been suggested by students themselves. Teachers, too, have the opportunity to work in areas that interest them, an incentive to work hard to make a class meaningful and interesting to the students so it isn't dropped from the curriculum because of lack of interest.

TE 002 341

The concept of a semester elective system of English classes began with the Trenton, Michigan, study on Appropriate Placement for Excellence in English, now known as the APEX Program. This experimental program gives the student freedom to choose his English classes from a number of semester electives offered on the basis of student interest. Classes are non-graded; in other words, the student could take a particular course no matter what his grade level. Though emphasis is placed on the subject matter indicated by the course description, continuing experiences in all the basic communications skills are a major part of every course. Rather than placing the students in tracks, Trenton phased the classes, or indicated the degree of difficulty by labeling them phase one, two, three, four, and five. The classes rather than the students are phased; a student may move from one phase to another, as interest level may affect his ability and performance. Teachers, too, have more freedom of choice in what they are to teach, and their performance, too, may change according to interest level. Textbooks as we have known the textbook-company-dictated-English-program fold, because each teacher is free to develop the course outline as best fits his teaching methods and with the materials he prefers, often paperbacks because of their versatility.

Though many schools are following the lead of the APEX Program, which has met with considerable success according to both students and teachers, each department usually adapts the program with changes that meet the needs of individual departments. At Tempe High School, we chose to begin with a two-year semester elective program for juniors and seniors. The new freshman and sophomore curriculum consists of four required one-semester classes: Mass Media, Literature, Composition, and Oral Expression, plus a choice of any of the other course offerings for elective credit. Rather than phase the courses in five levels, we decided that the

only differentiation should be by subject matter that might be more difficult or might appeal to the more academically oriented student, such as Modern Grammar. The freshman and sophomore courses, also, are not phased, as a Communications Program is provided for the students not placed in the regular English program.

It took two years from the planning stage to actual scheduling to put the elective program into effect. Although the work was done in one year, the first year served as a time for exploration of curriculum ideas. A curriculum committee was organized to gather information and to keep the idea of curriculum revision before the group.

When school opened the second year, serious work began. Teachers' enthusiasm was high and the department united in working out the logistics of implementing an elective program. The first questions concerned the overall structure: one, two, or three years in the elective program? what to offer for freshmen or sophomores not on the elective system? semester length classes? Though some members of the department favored an all-elective program for freshmen through seniors, which is in operation in many schools, the majority decision was to offer to juniors and seniors only as many electives as teacher load would permit with no more than three preparations per teacher. After a great deal of discussion, we decided to require Mass Media and Literature for freshmen, and Composition and Oral Expression for sophomores. Each of these courses offers an overview of the designated subject matter area, with activities in all areas of communication skills: reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking.

The original APEX Elective Program suggests a rather definite stratification of levels of challenge by placement of the courses in five phases, but our decision was to make only two differentiations: regular courses and "extra challenge courses" usually determined by the nature of the subject matter, such as the more difficult nature of Literary Criticism. On the freshman and sophomore levels, all courses are regular, as the Communications Program provides for students who need special help in communication skills. Within each course there should be enough latitude to grant individual choice to each student so he can set his own goals ahead of the average student if he wishes.

After developing this general structure, we used brainstorming sessions to collect as many course titles to offer as possible. Short course descriptions of each of these were written and reproduced, and each English teacher discussed the elective program with his students. At the same time, students were presented with the list of course descriptions of fifty-three possible courses. They were asked to choose the six they would be most interested in taking and were encouraged to add titles to the list.

The following list shows the courses listed in the order of preference, with numbers indicating how many students listed the course as one of his six choices.

Mass Media (341)
Aesthetics of the Film (319)
Free Reading (221)
Reading Techniques (203)
Short Story (202)
Creative Writing (190)
Research Processes (188)
Science Fiction (176)
Independent Studies (165)
Bible as Literature (129)
Literature of Social Change (128)
Writing to Persuade (128)
*Utopia and Anti-utopia (99)
Literature of War (96)
Comedy (96)
Non-fiction (85)
*Modern Novel (81)
Biography (81)
The Essay (80)
Modern Grammar (77)

*Cultural Studies (74)
Language Study (74)
Poetry (74)
*Masterpieces of World Literature (71)
Conformity and Individuality (68)
Ethnic Literature (65)
Semantics (65)
Realism and Romanticism (63)
Advanced Mass Media (60)
Contemporary American Literature (58)
Understanding Other Cultures (57)
Literature of the Far East (54)
The Novel (53)
Expository Writing (47)
Survey of British Literature (39)
*Literary Criticism (39)

*Advanced Research (36)
Contemporary Drama (35)
Tragedy (31)
History of the Theatre (30)
Literature as a Shaping Influence on History (28)
Survey of American Literature (27)
Literature of Interest to Girls (17)
Literature of Interest to Boys (16)
Contemporary British Literature (15)
Contemporary American Drama (14)
Journalistic Composition (11)
Man Challenging Authority (10)
World Drama (9)
Shakespeare (2)
Mythology--Added Later
Humor--Added Later

*Courses offering extra challenge, for students especially interested in that area or for college prep students.

The basic groundwork of general structure and potential course offerings decided upon, we were ready to make our curriculum proposal to the Board of Education for their approval. We prepared and reproduced copies of written explanations to supplement our oral presentation of the following:

1. An explanation of the elective system, its origin and basic concepts of electing, phasing, and non-grading.
2. A presentation of the Tempe High School philosophy and objectives, along with points we made to show that the present English curriculum was not meeting those specifications.
3. An explanation of our proposal as outlined above and our plan for implementing the proposal.
4. Presentation of reasons why the proposed elective program would be more successful than the present curriculum in carrying out the school philosophy and objectives.
5. A list of courses and descriptions that were tentative offerings.
6. Two articles from professional magazines:
"Nongrading, Electing, and Phasing: Basics of Revolution for Relevance," by Donald F. Weise, ENGLISH JOURNAL, January, 1970.
"Traditional English is 'Changing into' Mini Courses," by Karen Branan, SCHOLASTIC TEACHER, February 2, 1970.

We presented the program in a regular board meeting; and at a later, more private discussion session the program was accepted to be implemented the following year. It was necessary to carefully explain the concept of an elective program, how it would fit into the existing structure, and to emphasize that an elective program would provide for the "basics".

Upon acceptance of the program by the Board of Education, we began to plan and carry out its implementation: to make an actual list of courses, to have the students register for the courses they wish to elect and to send the information to the counselors for enrollment, to make a schedule of classes to show the number of sections and each teacher's personal schedule, and to write the course outlines.

A number of us in the department obtained university credit for the work we were doing by making arrangements with the Secondary Education and English Education departments at Arizona State University for three hours of Independent Study. Organization into a class for credit helped us pull ourselves together into a tighter, more purposeful and more productive group. In addition, it provided a situation for the university to work in a live curriculum-planning project with a group of teachers in the community, and we profited from the contact with and suggestions of three curriculum consultants: Dr. Nelson Haggerson, Dr. Naomi Cohen, and Dr. Ken Donelson.

We held our own meetings once or twice a week during which we solved problems of implementing a program as we encountered them. We also used our meetings for brainstorming and sharing ideas for the course outlines we were developing, which would later be turned in for our course credit. Meeting consistently and for college credit kept each person involved and enthusiastic about the developing program.

Before we began the serious planning of a definite list of course offerings and a schedule of teachers' class loads, we invited the counseling department to one of our meetings. We informed them of specific aspects of our elective program and asked them for suggestions. From the beginning we tried to develop a positive attitude in the students by assuring that they actually get enrolled in their top choices of courses. If scheduling problems were unavoidable, students would still be able to enroll in their third or fourth choices.

After enlisting the help of the counselors, we proceeded to rework the list of actual course offerings by cutting and revising the original list of fifty-three classes presented to the Board of Education. Short descriptions of each of these courses were used as the blurbs from which the students made their choices. In order to give the students a realistic idea of what would be stressed in the course, these blurbs were written by the teacher who had definitely volunteered to teach the course and who would be writing the course outline. Following are two examples of blurbs written for the students.

Science Fiction

> A study in an important body of literature that has only recently achieved a respectability and an importance of its own. Science fiction offers adventure, imagination, and insight because it leaves the world of often-traveled paths, and frees the author and reader to think new thoughts.

Contemporary Drama

> This course will emphasize the reading of great plays of the modern world as well as those currently being written and produced. It will also include activities in play acting and play writing. Whenever possible, the class will attend live dramatic productions and learn to react to and criticize contemporary drama.

It's difficult to say just how much effect the blurb has on the choices students make. Science Fiction as described above was one of the more popular courses, maybe partially as a result of a simple, imaginative description. The Contemporary Drama course was not popular enough to be included in the final list of offerings. Though it was important to have short, easy reading descriptions of the courses, I would be tempted to say that the title of the course was as important or more so in appeal to the students. It is possible that students were frightened by the word 'contemporary' as none of the courses with that word in the title were popular.

Students were asked a second time to write, in order of preference, their top six choices. Though we chose to phase our electives only according to the character of the subject matter, the teachers counseled their students to assure that none chose courses which didn't fit their abilities. From this survey tally of sophomores and juniors who would actually be taking the electives, we took the top twenty-four courses as the final list of offerings. We found it necessary to run a third tally with the list of twenty-four to have students make a final list of their six preferences as some of their choices had been eliminated. These lists were used for the final schedule and were given to the counselors to be kept in the students' files for registration. Following is a list of the final twenty-four courses in order of popularity. Numbers indicate how many sophomores and juniors chose the course as one of their six preferences.

Mass Media (360)
Aesthetics of the Film (303)
Research Processes (296)
Humor (290)
Creative Writing (248)
Free Reading (246)
Science Fiction (237)
Short Story (220)
Mythology (217)
Reading Enrichment (292)
Comedy-Tragedy (167)
Bible as Literature (148)
Writing to Persuade (144)
Modern Novel (134)
Literature of War (125)
Cultural Studies (120)
Semantics (112)
Utopia-Anti-Utopia (110)
Poetry (110)
World Literature (103)
Modern Grammar (94)
Independent Study (90)
*Selections from American Literature (69)
*Selections from British Literature (59)

*Though not very popular, these courses were included as a safeguard against complaints about not offering American and British literature.

Students were not told which teacher would be teaching what courses, but after the program is in effect for a time there would probably be an amount of consistency so that often students would know the teachers. Though some disadvantages have been pointed out concerning this (namely that students will choose the teacher rather than the course), one large advantage probably outweighs them all: that student preference for certain courses can be an incentive to the teacher to make his own pet courses successful.

Adapting an idea from the APEX curriculum, one teacher volunteered to be course chairman for each course. His responsibilities are to write the course outline for the course or courses that he definitely will teach and to coordinate other teachers of the same course. His course outline would serve as a basis for others to use only if they wish, but we felt that each teacher should have the freedom to teach the course as he wishes.

In order to have consistency in the course outlines, we followed a format agreed upon by the department, a modification of that suggested by APEX, including the following items: course title, course description, objectives, chief emphases in each of the communications skills (activities in each course on reading, thinking, writing, listening, and speaking), unit outline, suggestions and approaches, student required materials (which they buy), teacher supplementary materials, and evaluation procedures. Course outlines were written for each of the freshmen and sophomore courses, as well as the junior and senior electives; thus each teacher was course chairman and wrote outlines for two or three courses. As a result of the interaction during department meetings, we were all familiar with course outlines others were writing, and we shared materials and suggestions--one of the most profitable and enjoyable parts of the curriculum work.

Following are condensations of three course outlines.

The Film (formerly Aesthetics of the Film), written by Cindy Crow.

Course Description. To study the film means to take a close look at films which are being produced, both the experimental art film and the major entertainment production, as well as the growth and development of the film into a major means of entertainment and mass communication. Films will be shown to give the student the opportunity to study filming techniques as well as the content of the film. Hopefully, the students will have the chance to make their own movies as personal means of expression and communication.

Instead of requiring students to buy a textbook, a lab fee of $2.50 is charged to provide funds for film rentals and for purchasing and developing film.

Unit Outline, Books, Films, and Magazines to be used.

Unit 1--One-week introduction to film study.
- Movies: THE MOVIES LEARN TO TALK and CELLULOID COLLAGE
- Books: EXPLORING THE FILM and SCREEN EXPERIENCE: AN APPROACH TO FILM
- Magazines: Current issues of LIFE

Unit 2--Four weeks on film types.
- Documentary Films: SIXTEEN IN WEBSTER GROVES, HARVEST OF SHAME, NIGHT AND FOG, CORRAL, LONELY BOY, ELEPHANT HUNTER
- Pure Film: BEGONE DULL CARE, NEIGHBORS, DANCE SQUARED, A CHAIRY TALE, DREAM OF WILD HORSES
- Literary Adaptations: AN OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE, HANGMAN, SILENT SNOW - SECRET SNOW, SEA FEVER

Unit 3--Four weeks on David Sohn's film study program THE CREATIVE EYE, using the 17 films suggested.

Unit 4--Five weeks of production.

Unit 5--Three-week research project.

Literature of War, written by Cindy Standish

Course Description. Prose and poetry which have been influenced by the chaotic effects of war will be covered in this course. The change in morals and values during wartime situations will be studied along with the conflicts (man against himself, man against man, etc.) which erupt from these unstable conditions.

Chief Emphases. The course will emphasize the direct relationship between war and an abrupt change in a nation's values and standards and the conflicts that arise. It will also attempt to illustrate the universality of man as well as his individuality.

Semester Outline of Thematic Units

SEARCH FOR PERSONAL MEANINGS AND VALUES
- Films: WORLD WAR I--THE WAR YEARS, WORLD WAR I--THE BACKGROUND
- Books: ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT
- Recordings: "Victory at Sea," compared with Gould's "World War I"
- Short Stories: "By the Waters of Babylon"
- Poems: "My Sweet Old Etcetera" by Cummings, "Does It Matter" and "Base Details" by Sassoon, "The Soldier" by Brooke, "I Have a Rendezvous with Death" by Seeger, "German Prisoners" by Lee (Joseph), "Arms and the Boy" by Owen

SURVIVAL DURING WAR
Films: THE TWISTED CROSS
Books: DIARY OF A YOUNG GIRL
Poems: "Elegy Just in Case" by John Ciardi

DESTRUCTION OF THE INNOCENT
Books: HIROSHIMA
Films: SECOND WORLD WAR--ALLIED VICTORY, A TALE OF TWO CITIES -- HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI
Short Stories: "The Old Man at the Bridge"
Television Play: "The Final War of Olly Winter"

PERSONAL CONFLICTS AND DECISIONS
Films: LEE, NIGHT AND FOG
Television Play: "Lee at Gettysburg"
Poems: "Gone Away Blues" by Thomas McGrath
Filmstrip: "Judaism"
Books: MILA 18

DISILLUSIONMENT CREATED BY WAR
Films: THE CIVIL WAR, THE CIVIL WAR--1863-1865, OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE
Books: RED BADGE OF COURAGE, A FAREWELL TO ARMS
Poems: "Do Not Weep Maiden, War Is Kind" by Crane
"Common Form" by Kipling, "In Distrust of Merits" by Marianne Moore

A SENSE OF DUTY--LOYALTY VS. DISLOYALTY TO CAUSE
Films: VARIATIONS ON A THEME
Books: THE BRIDGE OVER THE RIVER KWAI
Poems: "I Have a Rendezvous with Death" by Alan Seeger

ADJUSTMENT FROM WAR TO PEACE
Materials: ALL MY SONS, TEAHOUSE OF THE AUGUST MOON

Sophomore Composition, written by Jane Fitzgerald and Charlotte Schilt

Course Description. This course is designed for students who will soon be enrolling in the elective classes. Its main purpose is to teach the student to express his ideas clearly, effectively, and in a logical order. This class will also try to prepare the student for the upper level writing courses, as well as improve his skill in essay writing, which will be necessary for most of his upper level high school courses.

Textbooks: WRITING: UNIT--LESSONS IN COMPOSITION
STOP, LOOK AND WRITE
VOICES IN LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND COMPOSITION--2
THE EFFECTIVE THEME
VOCABULARY FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS
THE RHETORIC OF SENTENCES

Unit Outline
Unit 1: Descriptive Writing
Unit 2: Expository Writing, with emphasis on controlling idea and paragraph development

Unit 3: Increasing Sentence Effectiveness, with emphasis on vocabulary refinement, figurative language, and sentence structure
Unit 4: Total Composition, using lessons from WRITING: UNIT-LESSONS IN COMPOSITION

The final enrollment in courses, obtained by counting students' first and second choices, was made to determine as nearly as possible the number of sections of each course that should be scheduled. We decided as a group how many students should be enrolled in a class (generally 20 in composition classes and 30 in literature classes), and divided that number into the number of students who signed up for the course as first or second choice in order to calculate the number of sections to be scheduled. With suggestions from the registrar, a small committee worked out a tentative master schedule by matching as closely as possible the teachers' preferences with the sections on the schedule. The schedule was then presented to the department for modification, which took some juggling and some giving on the part of individuals, but each teacher emerged with at least one or two electives that he wanted. According to department decision, each teacher also volunteered for one, two, or three sections of one of the freshman or sophomore classes. This final schedule stands until pre-registration and late enrollment during the summer are finished, when necessary revisions will be made.

As most of the materials used in elective courses are paperback, some schools handle the textbook sales through a store operated by the English Department, details for which would have to be worked out for each school. We were not allowed to organize our own store at Tempe High School, so book orders are taken care of through the regular bookstore. Teachers place their orders by May 31 for the estimated number of books for the coming year. In some courses, such as Film Study, instead of requiring the students to buy textbooks, a lab fee of approximately $2.50 is charged to be used as the teacher sees the need for film rentals, raw film, etc.

In order to coordinate an elective program to use materials and other special resources to the fullest advantage, strong organization within the department is an advantage. For example, a course chairman can coordinate all sections of Film Study and see that each teacher is aware of materials ordered by other teachers, and the Department Chairman might take the responsibility for further coordination within the department. Ample office space with professional materials and a place for department communication can further facilitate coordination.

Another consideration early in the planning of an elective program is preparation of some means of evaluation to compare the old program with the new one. We took a survey of attitudes by having students write answers to questions of attitude and information, and we will repeat the questionnaire at the end of the first year of the elective program. Though this will give us an idea of student attitudes and possibly of changes in attitudes, it is inadequate to measure differences in learning and achievement. As pressure is placed on the educational system to validate what it says it is producing, the evaluation of new programs is becoming more and more important.

After working with the planning of the semester elective program, I am able to see some important aspects where we could have been more effective. Because our first explanation to the Board of Education was not complete enough in details explaining an elective program and how we would implement it, the board members were not satisfied that they were well enough informed to approve the program. It was necessary, then, to prepare a very detailed presentation as outlined earlier, which could have been presented the first time instead.

Also, we should consider whether main emphasis is to be placed on teachers' interests or on students' interests, as most teachers will have some special interest that they are anxious to add to the curriculum. How much of the students' choice is actually eliminated when they are presented with a teacher-prepared list of course offerings, even though they are encouraged to add to it? Perhaps they would be more involved in the curriculum change if they were asked to begin the list of courses rather than initially experience the new curriculum in giving their response to an already prepared list of courses. We tried to provide for both teachers' and students' interests in course subject matter, although it may have leaned more heavily toward teacher interests as they prepared the initial list of courses.

Another consideration that should come early in planning stages is getting community involvement--in the planning if possible, but at least in giving them information on changes that are being made. Several interested parents have commented that they would have liked to know about curriculum changes.

Of course, an elective English program does not solve all the problems we face in teaching English, nor was it intended to do so. But through a more flexible structure we can design contemporary, interesting classes which get at the problem of student apathy. An elective program doesn't guarantee that teachers will drastically change their approaches and attitudes, but what it does do is provide a flexible structure where students have the opportunity to make choices based on their own interests.

Post Script. At this writing, the semester elective program at Tempe High School has been in operation for about a month. Teachers made no negative comments about the elective program itself. There was a school-wide scheduling problem, which showed up in the English elective program as unbalanced class loads and somewhat of an overload in many of the classes. Also, a few of the students were unable to be scheduled in their first two choices of courses due to schedule conflicts. One first-year difficulty was that all course outlines were not completely worked out, especially causing hardship for new teachers hired during the summer. But all the teachers seem to be finding the courses exciting to teach and the students more responsive than in past years, and the extra effort of planning and teaching new courses is worthwhile. Surprisingly everything has gone smoothly for a beginning program. At present, the department is working on a complete written explanation of the program for anyone who has questions.